

E-12

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KGB's Attempts at Political Forgery

Forgery is a favorite Soviet weapon in the Cold War but has never been an important part of the U.S. disinformation arsenal. "There isn't that kind of concept in the U.S. government," said Herbert Romerstein, a U.S. Information Agency expert on Soviet disinformation. In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, political forgeries are a tradition dating back to czarist times.

"We don't win in a war of lies," Romerstein said. "We can win in a war of truth against lies. But our credibility is much too important to jeopardize. The Soviets don't worry about this, because truth or falsity is not relevant to their thinking of how to influence people. It is to ours."

For all its experience, though, the KGB frequently turns out pretty crude fakes that are easy for Western intelligence to expose. From Romerstein and other sources, we've learned how to spot Soviet forgeries. Here are the clues:

- Anonymous mailings. The KGB usually sends its "leaks" to the news media in plain brown wrappers with no return address, making it difficult to verify the document's authenticity. That often works with gullible or anti-American publications.

Realizing that the communist press has little credibility, the KGB tries to plant its forgeries in noncommunist publications. Even a tiny item will do; it can then be picked up and amplified as "a well-known fact" by the pro-Soviet press. After sufficient repetition, it is broadcast by the Soviet propaganda network, usually with the standard introduction, "As the whole world knows . . ."

- Outdated or inaccurate bureaucratic titles and

forms. The KGB has as much trouble as Americans do trying to keep up with the ever-changing style of U.S. government paperwork. Even nongovernment jargon can foil KGB forgers. Last year, for example, spurious threats to African and Asian athletes at the Los Angeles Olympics were signed "Ku Klux Klan." The Soviets didn't know that authentic Klan groups have distinctive titles such as "Invisible Empire of the Ku Klux Klan." After this was pointed out in press accounts, the Soviet news service Tass promptly reported that the letters had been signed "Invisible Empire."

- Unidiomatic English and misspellings. British traitor H.A.R. (Kim) Philby was able to proofread the major KGB forgeries to make sure that at least American usages were authentic. Now, there seems to be no one to correct the stilted, schoolbook English or giveaway spellings.

Unusual names also trip up the KGB. A 1982 memo supposedly written by Commerce Secretary Malcolm Baldrige spelled his name "Baldrige."

Occasionally, the KGB will slip by using translations of Soviet terms that have no U.S. meaning. One supposedly internal U.S. government memo referred to the CIA not as "the Company," as some Americans do, but as "Competent Bodies," which is the Soviet term for their secret services.

Romerstein said this type of forgery is unique to the KGB. "I've never seen a forged Andropov letter," he said. "I've never seen a forged Chernenko letter. I've never seen a forged Gorbachev letter. But I have seen forged Reagan letters, and I've seen forged Ford and Carter letters. Nobody else does it."